

All of those riders are somebody's child.

Trisa Chancey  
St. Marys

iff's office search and rescue team, Camden County Fire Rescue, members of the citizens academy and Georgia

because of the proximity to the Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base. Since Sept. 11, 2001, our airport has been a "target" for closure and it

for nearly 12 million jobs and represented 5.4 percent of GDP (gross domestic

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# A new chapter for St. Marys

**T**wo and a half years ago when I became mayor, it became clear that the city did not have the financial resources or the authority to resolve the decade-plus long debate regarding the future of the St. Marys Airport.

The matter could only be resolved at the national, not local, level. The city notified officials at the Federal Aviation Administration and the Department of the Navy that their involvement would be required to resolve the issue.

For those unfamiliar with the history, the future of the St. Marys Airport was debated for years prior to the 9/11 attacks. Discussion heightened after the attacks, which resulted in the temporary closing of the airport by the federal government for safety reasons related to its proximity to Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base.

Ultimately the airport was allowed to reopen. From 2002 onward, the city received written concerns regarding safety and security issues at the airport from five base commanders in addition to Rear Adm. Gerald Talbot and the latest from Rear Adm. Jack Scorby Jr. as the commanding officer of Navy Region Southeast. The Joint Land Use Study (JLUS) of 2014 that the city accepted recommended closing the airport.

As the Navy continued urging the closing/relocation, the FAA agreed to open discussions with the Navy to



**John Morrissey**

Guest columnist

reach a decision on the path forward.

As with any issue that requires multiple levels of interaction among federal bureaucracies, the discussions were no doubt extensive and at the highest level. We in the city remained optimistic that the interests of St. Marys would be given appropriate consideration during any deliberations. The city communicated with federal officials as requested and awaited the results of their decision making.

We recognized some in the community hoped the airport could remain open, but it became increasingly obvious that the Navy/FAA solution was moving forward. Thus, our focus continued to be on a result that would best serve the city of 17,000 citizens.

With last week's news that pending legislation includes a proposed defense budget that would provide funds to meet FAA airport closure requirements and poten-

tially relocate the airport, it appears that an outcome is near. If the legislation now passes the U.S. Senate, work will begin by federal officials to take the steps necessary to implement the closure plan.

The current legislation language states that the City of St. Marys will retain ownership of the airport property for any uses it determines appropriate as long as it does not interfere with the safety and security of the base. This property can now be considered land available for development both within our master planning process and for the Joint Development Authority as it promotes development opportunities in St. Marys.

Given final legislative approvals, the closing will not occur overnight. It will probably take at least a year before all the appraisals and other requirements from both the Navy and FAA are completed. Options could exist for the FAA to work with Camden County officials and U.S. Rep. Buddy Carter's office to determine an ideal location in southeast Georgia for a potential new regional airport. That is a decision the FAA will make and the City of St. Marys will not be involved in the selection process.

With the anticipated closing, the city will work with the airport authority to keep the tenants still operating at the airport apprised of timelines for action by the FAA or Navy as we learn about

them so those tenants can make their own relocation plans.

I remain optimistic this matter will be resolved in a satisfactory manner for the base, the FAA and our 17,000 citizens. We will continue to advise citizens as we learn more about the details.

We should certainly view this pending action as another strong potential upturn for our local economy.

We will maintain our strong and cooperative partnership with the naval submarine base. We will have an additional 278 acres available for commercial development. The St. Marys Master Plan Steering Committee will now be able to include significant new land use options as we plan for the future.

And for the first time in years we will have major acreage of marketable land for economic development and job creation.

This is the kind of momentum the city has been seeking to provide more jobs, create more economic stability, improve industrial-based revenues and bring added customers to our existing businesses.

We've all been looking for ways to stimulate our economy. This action is one of those opportunities. Let's take advantage of it.

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